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Political Aim Vs. Secrecy

Request to Reporters At Briefing Explained

By PHILIP TAUBMAN

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 15 — The Defense Department's request Tuesday that reporters sign a secrecy agreement before attending a briefing about Soviet military capacity added a new twist to a familiar Washington phenomenon: the declassification of intelligence information by the Government for political purposes.

News
Analysis

Every recent administration, after weighing political interests against security considerations, has selectively disclosed intelligence secrets that it hoped would increase public support for Administration policies. In such cases, the concern of intelligence agencies that important sources and methods of obtaining intelligence might be compromised has been swept aside by the White House.

The secrecy agreement proposed by the Defense Department, senior Reagan Administration officials said today, was a flawed effort to reconcile those differences by insuring that reporters who received sensitive intelligence information did not disclose the means by which the Government obtained it.

As written, however, the agreement would have prohibited any dissemination of the information, even to the reporters' editors, a blanket ban that some intelligence officials, irritated by the Pentagon's handling of the issue, said negated the point of the briefing.

"The idea was to get the information out so people would understand how serious the Soviet threat is," a senior intelligence official remarked.

Said to Reflect Confusion

The annoyance of some intelligence officials apparently reflected confusion among national security officials about the aim of the Defense Department briefing and its format.

The idea of holding the briefing, according to both Defense and intelligence officials, was initiated by Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger several weeks ago after reporters asked for information to support the Administration's contention that the Soviet Union posed a grave military threat to the United States. A similar briefing on the Soviet military threat is often given to visiting heads of state.

There appears to have been general agreement that one aim of Tuesday's session was to show the correspondents who regularly cover the Defense Department that the Government had solid evidence of improved Soviet military capacity posing a threat to the United States and its allies in Europe.

"There really is an overwhelming body of evidence that shows the Soviets have pushed astride or ahead of the United States in crucial military areas," a senior intelligence official said. "Everyone who sees the briefing ends up saying, 'My God, they're doing a lot.'"

Both Pentagon and intelligence officials said they had hoped that the briefing might make the reporters more understanding of the Administration's charges about the Soviet Union, perhaps producing over the long run more sympathetic reporting about the increases in military spending proposed by President Reagan.

Photographs Especially Sensitive

The problem was that the information that officials felt was potentially most persuasive was also the most sensitive: data, particularly photographs, produced by satellites and other highly secret electronic systems.

A senior intelligence official today equated Tuesday's briefing with one given earlier this year about Soviet and Cuban involvement in Central America. In that briefing, which was on the record, intelligence analysts made public photographs of new military installations in Nicaragua that the analysts said had been constructed by Cuba and the Soviet Union. The photographs were taken by high-flying American reconnaissance aircraft.

The key difference between that briefing and Tuesday's, according to intelligence officials, was the use of photographs taken by satellite. The Government has never made such photographs public, the officials said.

One reason is concern that publication of such photographs would reveal to the Russians information about the capacity and targets of the satellites. Another is a longstanding fear among intelligence officials that the public disclosure of even one such photograph might open the door to requests for additional pictures under the Freedom of Information Act.

To safeguard the security of the satellite photographs used in Tuesday's briefing, the Central Intelligence Agency, which controls access to the pictures, insisted that reporters sign a secrecy agreement, according to both Pentagon and C.I.A. officials.

Concern on Sources of Data

The intent they said, was not to prohibit the dissemination of all the information about the Soviet military buildup but rather to insure that the journalists did not publish or broadcast anything that would pinpoint the sources of the information.

A result, to the consternation of some intelligence officials, was a blanket secrecy agreement that stipulated that the reporters never disclose "in writing, broadcast or any verbal discourse" the information they would receive. The reporters refused to sign it.

After extensive discussions between the correspondents and senior Defense officials, the Pentagon agreed to proceed with the briefing on the basis of a verbal understanding that some reporters initially interpreted as an agreement not to publish the information.

But reporters who attended the briefing said today that the conditions permitted them to disclose information from the briefing, provided they did not specify where it came from.